

Institution: University of Hertfordshire
Unit of Assessment: Panel D (29): English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Sulayman Al-Bassam's Arab Shakespeare Plays
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The impact of Graham Holderness's work lies in the establishment of a synergy between academic research and the professional practice of a successful dramatist, Sulayman Al-Bassam, whose adaptations of Shakespeare into Arabic have played in theatres on four continents. Originating as a critical study, the research developed, via direct engagement with the writer, into a public 'conversation', thus giving ideas derived from the research a global reach. The insights of the research have been both internalised in the plays and disseminated via accompanying public events, thus conveying them to the audiences attending the performances. This continuing rapprochement reveals a demonstrable influence of the research over the writer's artistic choices.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Professor Graham Holderness began to undertake research in this area between 2005 and 2007, in the context of a study of Shakespeare and globalisation conducted with Visiting Professor Bryan Loughrey and sociologist Martin Allbrow (Roehampton University). Dramatist Sulayman Al-Bassam's <i>Al-Hamlet Summit</i> provided an example of theatrical work that in its intercultural and linguistic hybridity transcended the parameters of 'postcolonial' writing. Postcolonial interpretative models focus on local origins, and on conflicts between dominant and subaltern cultures. Al-Bassam's multi-lingual work clearly originated from a regional focus, but was written and produced for international mobility and universal access, and was therefore identified as a new globalised form of theatre (Allbrow coined the now popular term 'glocal' to define such interventions). The findings of this research (published in a major essay in <i>Essays and Studies</i> in 2007) used <i>The Al-Hamlet Summit</i> as a case study.</p> <p>Between 2006 and 2008 Holderness undertook a series of critical contextualizations of Al-Bassam's adaptations of <i>Hamlet</i> and <i>Richard III</i>, exploring their cultural, linguistic and theatrical significance, and highlighting their value as border-crossing cultural conversations. Studies of the <i>Hamlet</i> adaptation demonstrated how Al-Bassam expanded the parameters of political theatre to disclose the tragic potentialities of the 'clash of civilizations'; and studies of the <i>Richard III</i> adaptation explored, in the context of translation studies, how a Shakespeare history play could be applied to conditions in the Arab world. A three-year term as External Examiner for the Arab Open University, based in Kuwait (entailing two visits of one week each per year, 2008–10), deepened Holderness's knowledge of Middle Eastern culture in terms of politics, culture and language, including a better understanding of the Arab world's cultural diversity and the links between political, religious and cultural authority. Further work followed on Shakespeare and Islam, especially relevant to Shakespeare's portrayals of Venice, and on Shakespeare and terrorism. A particular example of the latter was occasioned by the suicide bombing of an amateur production of <i>Twelfth Night</i> in Qatar in 2007. In collaboration with Bryan Loughrey, Holderness researched this event and its aftermath, including fieldwork examining the scene and interviewing participants. Their essay 'Rudely Interrupted' explored the links between Shakespeare and Western power, and debated whether Shakespeare's work should be seen as an exemplification or a critique of Western foreign policy in the Middle East. Al-Bassam has acknowledged that this research led him to undertake an adaptation of <i>Twelfth Night</i> as the third work in his Arab Shakespeare trilogy.</p> <p>On the basis of this work Holderness was invited to act as Consulting Editor on a special issue of the US-based journal <i>Shakespeare Yearbook</i> on <i>Shakespeare After 9/11: How a Social Trauma Reshapes Interpretation</i>, which brought together essays by scholars and testimonies from distinguished American theatre practitioners on how their work had been influenced by the terrorist</p>

attacks of 9/11. This experience confirmed Holderness's prior assumption that while American literary specialists were fully engaged and deeply responsive to 9/11, theatre workers seemed relatively nonplussed and uncertain of its implications. This insight endorsed his view that Middle Eastern writers like Al-Bassam were leading the way in this field, and goes some way to explaining the excitement generated when Al-Bassam's work plays in America.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

– All of the following outputs are peer-reviewed; the third and fifth are keynote papers

1. Graham Holderness, "Silence bleeds": Hamlet Across Borders. The Shakespearean Adaptations of Sulayman Al-Bassam', *European Journal of English Studies*, 12:1, 'New Englishes' (Spring 2008), pp. 59–77. doi: 10.1080.13825570801900547
2. Graham Holderness, 'From Summit to Tragedy: Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III* and Political Theatre', *Critical Survey*, 19:3 (Winter 2007), pp. 124–43. doi: 10.3167/cs.2007.190308
3. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, 'Shakespeare and Terror', in *Shakespeare After 9/11* (special issue – vol. 20 of *Shakespeare Yearbook*), eds Matthew Biberman and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011). ISBN 978-0773437302
4. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, "Rudely interrupted": Shakespeare and Terrorism' *Critical Survey*, 19:3 (Winter 2007), pp. 107–23. doi: 10.3167/cs.2007.190307
5. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, 'Arabesque: Shakespeare and Globalisation', *Essays and Studies*, 59, *Globalisation and its Discontents: Writing the Global Culture*, edited by Stan Smith (English Association and D.S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 24–46. ISBN 1843840758

Grants

AHRC Grant, 'Arab Shakespeare', 2007–8, £8,000. Awarded to Graham Holderness.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Arab dramatists have been translating and adapting Shakespeare's plays for over a century, but Holderness's role in developing Arab Shakespeare as a new area of Shakespeare studies brought this to wider attention amongst both scholars and theatre audiences. Others learned of this cultural linkage of English and Arabic writing, with its opportunities for dialogue across ethnic, political and religious barriers, via the mass media.

Holderness and Sulayman Al-Bassam embarked on a scholar–dramatist collaboration (incorporating the latter's doctoral studies, due to complete 2014, under Holderness's supervision) that has influenced theatre companies, actors and audiences across several continents. A specialist in Shakespeare's history plays, Holderness offered specific advice on Al-Bassam's adaptation of *Richard III* (initially titled *Baghdad Richard*), helping the dramatist move it from an agitprop work focused explicitly on Saddam Hussein towards one with broader political and cultural horizons. This enabled the medium of the Shakespearean historical drama to represent a contemporary region in a form intelligible to both Eastern and Western audiences.

Commissioned by the RSC and premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford in 2007, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* subsequently toured during 2008–9 in Washington DC, Abu Dhabi, New York, Kuwait, Damascus, Paris and Amsterdam. Attracting favourable comment from the start, the *Financial Times* said of the Stratford production (2007): 'Few works catch the various currents within Arabism and Islam'; while the *New York Times* (2009) judged it 'a big-picture,

energetic satire' that depicted a world which was 'a runaway hybrid of ancient Arab tradition and 21st-century technology'. The *Washington Post* (2009), struck by its 'intense portrait of how power can be seized by means of terror and control of the media', considered the play an 'estimable example of artistic cross-fertilization'.

During this world tour, Holderness presented the research underpinning it at conferences for academics and theatre professionals, including at Shakespeare's Globe and the British Shakespeare Association's Fourth Annual Conference (both 2009). In Paris, the script's French translation was published in programme form and contextualised with a critical essay by Holderness. This fertile interplay of research and practice was repeated for *Speaker's Progress*, Al-Bassam's adaptation of *Twelfth Night*. Staged in 2011 and 2012 in New York, Boston, Kuwait, Beirut, Tunisia, Cairo and Amsterdam, Al-Bassam publicly acknowledged during its Boston run that the work was informed by Holderness's 2007 study of the Doha Players theatre suicide bombing.

Two events accompanying the six-night Boston production, staged in the 600-seat Paramount Center main theatre, further exemplify how academic research can influence creative work, provide a context for its reception, and attract audiences. A discussion with Al-Bassam, Holderness and Professor Margaret Litvin was held on 12 October 2011 with an audience of around 50 Boston University students studying English and Arabic, who subsequently attended the play; the following evening's theatre audience also enjoyed a post-show conversation with the speakers. A video of the discussion was posted on the university's website and referenced by other sites, while prominent press outlets – such as the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Bay State Banner*, PBS Newshour and L'Orient le jour.com – covered the production itself. Reviewers applauded Al-Bassam's adaptation of Shakespeare to represent the contemporary East–West relationship, thereby facilitating common understanding and reciprocal recognition. The *New York Times* found it 'an elegantly staged satire', while two separate *Boston Globe* reviewers thought it 'a sharp theatrical metaphor for social and political transformation', and that it suggested 'not just that Shakespeare is the universal playwright . . . but also that art's power to subvert tyranny transcends eras and cultures'. The Kuwaiti press also deemed the play a characteristic voice of the Arab Spring: 'A groundbreaking exploration of the transformative events unfolding in today's Arab world', as 'Al-Bassam puts contemporary Arab reality into the dock of the accused and makes a compelling and brilliant case against it' (*Al Watan Daily Newspaper* and *Al Jareeda Newspaper*, 2011).

Typically, the performances outlined above enjoyed four- or five-night runs in venues of between 250 and 2,400 seats, testifying to significant audience engagement. Beyond the theatrical productions, interest is growing in Arab Shakespeare as a genre. Articles on the subject written or informed by Holderness have appeared in the Shakespeare's Globe Friends' newsletter *Around the Globe* (2011) and Gulf Air's in-flight magazine *Gulf Life* (2012) (estimated readership: 600,000). The Arab Shakespeare trilogy (*Al-Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III*, *Speaker's Progress*), with an introduction by Holderness and preface by Al-Bassam, is under contract with Methuen Drama (scheduled for 2014 publication).

In 2012 and 2013, full videos of the Arab Shakespeare trilogy, and contextualising materials, became freely available on MIT's *Global Shakespeares Video and Performance Archive* website. By respectively securing and offering reproduction rights, Holderness and Al-Bassam have paved the way for a wider range of Arab Shakespeare work to be incorporated into this online archive, and their as-yet unique pages offer a model for future site development. Visitor interest in the Arab Shakespeare pages is worldwide, with the majority of traffic coming from the US and UK. To the end of July 2013, just over 1,400 page views were recorded, with around half of the viewers being return visitors.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Selected Media Reviews

Richard III: An Arab Tragedy

1. Ben Brantley, 'Gloucester's Emir, Handsome This Time', *New York Times*, 11 June 2009.
<http://theater2.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/theater/reviews/11brantley.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>
2. Peter Marks, "'Richard III' in an Arabic Kingdom: Well-Traveled Bloodletting", *Washington Post*, 9 March 2009.
<www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/08/AR2009030801643_pf.html>

Speaker's Progress

3. Don Aucoin, The signs of "Progress", *Boston Globe*, 15 October 2011.
<www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/10/15/political_repression_artistic_defiance_in_kuwaiti_speakers_progress_at_artsemerson/>
4. Christopher Wallenberg, 'With Arab Spring, a play about change', *Boston Globe*, 9 October 2011.
<www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/10/09/the_speakers_progress_sees_twelfth_night_through_a_kuwaiti_lens/?page=1>
5. Jason Zinoman, 'Restricting Free Speech with Lab Coats in Illyria', *New York Times*, 7 October 2011. <<http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/theater/reviews/the-speakers-progress-in-brooklyn-review.html?scp=1&sq=sulayman&st=csepagewanted=1&hpw%22>>

Note: A full list of reviews and critics' quotes, including those from the Kuwaiti newspapers and the FT (2007) cited in section 4, can be found at: <www.sabab.org/media/>

Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre Website: <www.sabab.org>

6. 'Index of Works' page: Has links to details of all Al-Bassam productions and performances, including tour dates and venues of *Richard III* and *Speaker's Progress*:
<www.sabab.org/index-of-works/>

Global Shakespeares Website <<http://globalshakespeares.org/>>

This website, which is collecting a comprehensive video archive of Shakespearean performance throughout the world, features full videos of Sulayman Al-Bassam's Arab Trilogy:

7. *Al-Hamlet Summit* (Arabic): <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/hamlet-al-bassam-sulayman-2004/>>
8. *Richard III* (English): <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/richard-3-al-bassam-sulayman-2007/>>
9. *Speaker's Progress* (English): <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/the-speakers-progress-al-bassam-sulayman-2011/>>
10. A page documenting Holderness's contribution to the above pages and listing his essays:
<<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/graham-holderness/>>

Personal Corroboration

The director of the Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre has agreed to corroborate aspects of the impact described in section 4. Contact details are provided separately.